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DOI
10.1080/0020174X.2018.1502924

Publication date
2022

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Inquiry: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

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Citation for published version (APA):
https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2018.1502924
Is this what democracy looks like? (Never mind epistocracy)

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ABSTRACT
This essay is a critical study of Jason Brennan’s Against Democracy. We make three main points. First, we argue that Brennan’s proposal of a right to competent government only works if one considers the absence of government a viable proposition, something most of his opponents are not prepared to do. Second, we suggest that Brennan’s account of competent decision-making is blind to forms of oligarchic power that work against the very ideals of justice and epistemic virtue that competence is meant to safeguard. Third, we muster empirical evidence to argue that, in the real world, democracy is not just about making decisions and selecting policies, in which case Brennan’s argument misses its mark.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 May 2018; Accepted 20 July 2018

KEYWORDS
Democracy; oligarchy; epistocracy; realism

Scepticism towards democracy is at least as old as democracy itself. A fifth-century anonymous Athenian pamphleteer writes:

Anywhere in the world the best people are enemies of democracy: the best people are the least unhinged and most equitable, and the most inclined towards the good. The many, on the other hand, are the most ignorant, disorderly, evil: poverty pushes them into turpitude, as does their lack of education and their crudeness, which in some cases is the product of destitution. (Pseudo-Xenophon 1999, Const. Ath. 1.6, our translation).

Jason Brennan’s provocative Against Democracy (2016, hereinafter AD) belongs in a long line of similar anti-democratic Cahiers de doléances. It updates the genre in valuable ways insofar as it is written in the light of modern debates on the epistemic value of democracy, and of current empirical
evidence from the behavioural sciences. But the evidence isn’t all grist to Brennan’s mill. In fact it points in quite a different direction – or so we will argue.

Brennan helpfully summarises his argument as follows:

1. **Against proceduralism**: There are no good proceduralist grounds for preferring democracy to epistocracy.
2. **The competence principle**: It is presumed to be unjust and to violate a citizen’s rights to forcibly deprive them of life, liberty, or property, or significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent deliberative body, or as a result of decisions made in an incompetent way or in bad faith. Political decisions are presumed legitimate and authoritative only when produced by competent political bodies in a competent way and in good faith.
3. **Corollary of the competence principle**: Presumptively, we ought to replace an incompetent political decision-making method with a more competent one.
4. **Comparative institutional claims**: Universal suffrage tends to produce incompetent decisions, while certain forms of epistocracies are likely to produce more competent decisions.
5. **Conclusion**: We should probably replace democracy with certain forms of epistocracy (AD, 141–142).

In this essay we make three main points, in as many sections. Firstly, against (2), we argue that Brennan’s proposal of a right to competent government only works if one considers the absence of government a viable proposition – something most of his opponents aren’t prepared to do. Secondly, against (4), we argue that Brennan’s account of competent decision-making is blind to forms of oligarchic power that work against the very ideals of justice and epistemic virtue that competence is meant to safeguard. Thirdly, against both (2) and (4), we muster empirical evidence to argue that, in the real world, democracy just isn’t about making decisions and selecting policies. The first two arguments cast doubt on aspects of Brennan’s position. The third one is more damning. If the empirical evidence backing it up is sound, neither Brennan’s picture of democracy nor his reasons for proposing his version of epistocracy are left standing.

**(In)competent government or no government?**

In contemporary political philosophy, the term ‘epistocracy’ was popularised by David Estlund’s 2008 book *Democratic Authority*. One of
Estlund’s aims there was to show that we have moral reasons to resist rule by the knowers, despite its other attractions. Estlund argues that ‘the move from expertise to authority is a fallacy’ (Estlund 2008, 39). He maintains that epistocrats need to be committed to the ‘authority tenet’: ‘The normative political knowledge of those who know better is a warrant for their having political authority over others’ (Estlund 2008, 30). But, Estlund argues, being an expert doesn’t make anyone a boss without at least a further premise, and one that will be hard to defend. Brennan, however, argues that Estlund has set the bar too high for epistocracy. He maintains epistocrats don’t need an authority tenet, but only an antiauthority one:

> When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies not permitting them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence. (AD, 17)

So it would seem epistocracy doesn’t need the fallacious move from expertise to authority. In a sense, Brennan is right about this. However some different assumptions in his argument and in Estlund’s are worth scrutinising, to see exactly what is at stake here. Consider what Brennan says immediately after introducing his antiauthority tenet:

> Epistocrats need not assert that experts should be bosses. Epistocrats need only suggest that incompetent or unreasonable people should not be imposed on others as bosses. They need only contend that democratic decision making, in certain cases, lacks authority or legitimacy because it tends to be incompetent. This leaves open what, if anything, justifies political power. (AD, 17, emphasis added)

As one can see, Brennan purchases his weaker epistocratic tenet – the basis for his ‘right to competent government’ (AD, 140ff) – at the cost of imperilling the very possibility of authoritative government. Now that is not an objection per se, despite the low popularity of anarchism among political philosophers or the general public. However one may question whether Brennan’s move is a fair response to Estlund’s position. In our reading, Estlund’s book answers something like this question (among others): given that we can have justified political power, should it be assigned epistocratically or democratically? The anarchist option – necessary to get Brennan’s antiauthority tenet off the ground – isn’t even on the table for Estlund. When Estlund discusses an acceptability requirement as the basis of legitimacy (2008, 40ff), i.e. his key move to block the expert/boss inference, he specifies precisely the conditions under which political
power will be justified. Unlike Brennan, he doesn’t leave open the question of whether power can be justified at all.

At any rate, and irrespective of the dialectic between Estlund and Brennan, whether one finds the latter’s antiauthority tenet appealing will depend on one’s broader views on legitimacy and authority. It is somewhat puzzling, however, that Brennan should defend a system of rule (epistocracy, or rather democracy with an epistocratic corrective, as we shall see) while at the same time leaving open the possibility that no system of rule has legitimacy and/or authority. Philosophers are justly fond of conditionals, but if the antecedent in this one (‘if power can be justified …’) turns out to be false, then the readers of a book that deals exclusively with the consequent (‘… then we should have epistocracy’) may well be disappointed.

Epistocracy or oligarchy?

Conditionals aside, how does Brennan’s argument sit with actual power structures in advanced democracies? A burgeoning political science literature on ‘affluence and influence’ has shown, definitively, that upper-income Americans enjoy a range of structural advantages in the political process (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Gilens 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Bartels 2008). The super-rich, those with tens of millions or more in expendable assets, are especially adept at translating their resources into unequal political influence: funding Super-PACs and big-ticket philanthropy, voicing their opinions through new media structures, lobbying through campaign contributions and personal proximity to members of Congress, many of whom are also multimillionaires. These trends have led some scholars to argue that American democracy now functions like an ‘elective oligarchy’ (Winters and Page 2009).

Brennan is not an apologist for American oligarchy. He never stoops to an easy rationalisation of rising inequality and its political consequences. However, Brennan can seem indifferent towards, or even accepting of these consequences. After all, Brennan does not really find ‘rule of the rich’ objectionable, in principle, if it secures epistemic goods (set aside, for now, whether this is even a plausible conjecture – a point we will return to in the final part of this essay). Given the choice, he would indeed cast his epistemic lot with rich white males over, say, poorer African-American females (AD, 133).\(^1\) Brennan understands why this reasoning can run

\(^1\)Brennan is emphatic that he does not believe that rich white men ‘are morally superior, have greater intrinsic dignity, have more valuable lives, or that their interests count for more’ (AD, 133). Nonetheless,
afoul of our moral intuitions. But he thinks committed epistocrats must bite the bullet and follow the public opinion data where it leads.

Let us put aside the important point that access to resources like elite higher education is often strongly distributed along class-lines. Even still, Brennan is far too willing to put an epistemic gloss on prevailing forms of elite influence. Brennan finds ‘reason to celebrate’ when he reads that wealthier citizens enjoy greater government responsiveness to their policy preferences; ‘democracy works better than it otherwise would, because it doesn’t exactly work’ (AD, 198). By implication, an oligarchic bias in public policy can be productive when its main function is to counterbalance democratic excess. Brennan implicitly endorses the logic of the ‘mixed regime’ as an alternative to the pathologies of unregulated democracy. But the father of the mixed-regime, Aristotle, based his arguments for it, in part, out of concern for the dangers of oligarchy. He understood that oligarchic regimes are prone to distinctive moral and political vices. Oligarchies tend to overvalue wealth, and their rulers often succumb to what the Greeks called *pleonexia*, an insatiable desire for excess. This vice interferes with proper epistocratic rule, which is why Aristotle was intent on distinguishing true aristocrats from oligarchs who derive their power merely from superior wealth.

The problem, as Aristotle realised, is that wealth is never a perfect proxy for knowledge and virtue. In the contemporary context, this means we need to be alert to instances where the wealthy try to rationalise their unequal political influence by way of epistemic superiority. Suppose that more affluent citizens, say the top decile, are indeed better educated, as a cohort, and that these educational advantages translate into superior cohort-level knowledge on certain important political matters. Even still, this demographic fact fails to justify the disproportionate influence of the super-rich; the top .001% whose resources dwarf the merely ‘mass affluent’. A billionaire oil tycoon can spend millions advocating for his favoured energy policy, even though he might be no more knowledgeable on energy policy than the geologist within his own company. And even when the tycoon does possess superior competence, he is unlikely to have attained political influence on this basis alone. Presumably,

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Brennan insists that there is ‘ample and persistent evidence that right now, rich white men know more about politics than poor black women’ (AD, 133).

2Here, Brennan is responding directly to (Gilens 2012).

3See especially Aristotle’s *Politics* (Aristotle 1998); on Aristotle’s critique of ‘oligarchic harm’ and its implications for democratic theory, see Arlen (2016).

4Thus, the Aristotelian distinction between oligarchs and aristocrats remains quite fragile (see Arlen 2016, 9–12).
Brennan would agree that the mainstream scientific consensus on global warming now carries significant epistemic weight. Yet a circle of big-money donors, many of them linked to the billionaire Koch brothers, continues to fund opposition to that consensus, while lobbying against regulatory responses to climate change (Brulle 2014; Mayer 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016). Campaign contributors and Super-PAC donors have no special obligation to meet an epistemic standard. Such activities are primarily a barometer of material power.

More broadly, the preferences of the super-rich often diverge widely from the general public, especially on fiscal and regulatory matters: they are more likely to oppose increased regulation of big businesses, and oppose social welfare spending favoured by the broader population (e.g. Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013). From Brennan’s perspective, such findings are unsurprising: if wealthy people are better informed, then one would expect their preferences to diverge from the masses. Moreover, successful businessmen may have good epistemic reasons for opposing taxes and regulations, as informed by their practical experience. But because such policy positions are also consistent with their material interests, it can be difficult to separate out epistemic from purely pecuniary motivations.5

The inequality literature does reinforce some of Brennan’s concerns about civic aptitude. American voters often adopt limited time horizons, evaluating a President’s record solely based on election-year economic performance. This trend has aided Republican administrations, which have tended to experience better growth in election years (Bartels 2008, 98–110). Such ‘myopic’ voting patterns interfere with accountability models based on proper ‘retrospective’ evaluation. Moreover, voters are often ill-informed about the causes and consequences of rising inequality. Voters in the Bush years had roughly the same perceptions about the existence of inequality as did voters in the Ford years, despite the significant increase in inequality since the 1970s (Bartels 2008, 145–146). Forty percent of Americans neither supported nor opposed the Bush tax cuts, despite their massive impact on the federal budget (Bartels 2008, 163). And many voters came to believe, mistakenly, that estate tax repeal would lower their own tax burden (Bartels 2008, 207). Such trends caused the study author, Larry Bartels, to conclude that ‘genuine allegiance to the idea of equality may comfortably coexist with fervent support for policies that exacerbate inequality’ (Bartels 2008, 129–130).

5No to mention that, according to some epistemologists, knowledge itself is interest-relative, and more so as the stakes of decisions go up (Stanley 2005).
This is a conundrum. But surely, some blame for these epistemic shortcomings rests on the socioeconomic elites themselves, and the elaborate strategies at their disposal for moulding public opinion around hot-button issues like climate change and healthcare reform: campaign commercials, Super-PAC funded advocacy, professional spin-masters, and the like; spending which has only become more important in our polarised and corporatised media landscape.

In this climate, campaign finance reform has become a cause célèbre among academics, but Brennan pushes back, worrying that it might render politicians even less responsive to high income voters (AD, 198). While admirably contrarian, this position appears tone-deaf to the structural realities of the post-Citizens United climate. It is hardly a panacea, but campaign finance reform might reduce some of the information asymmetries that leave ordinary people vulnerable to special interest messaging; surely this is a desirable outcome, from an epistemic perspective.

Of course, even citizens who are politically active often diverge on basic factual issues. Bartels notes that the ‘proportion of extreme conservatives who were willing to admit that inequality had increased’ actually declined among those with greater overall political awareness (Bartels 2008, 155). By contrast, among ideologically committed liberals, increasing information was associated with greater acknowledgment of rising inequality (Bartels 2008, 155–156).

Epistemic competence need not be a distinctly partisan attribute. We agree with Brennan that committed epistocrats can, in principle, exist across the ideological spectrum, and Brennan would presumably affirm considerable pluralism in his ideal epistocracy. But pluralism offers only limited protection against oligarchy: however much the super-rich might be divided on social and cultural questions, they often align on the policy issues most germane to maintaining and defending their core economic privileges (Winters 2011). And they pursue a range of elaborate financial and legal strategies to achieve these financial objectives, drawing upon the services of ‘wealth defence’ professionals adept at the latest techniques in offshoring and tax avoidance (Winters 2011, 217–254).

To his credit, Brennan recognises that a political system biased in favour of a narrow set of class-interests is unacceptable (AD, 120), and he advocates a broad epistocratic class, numbering in the thousands or even millions (AD, 120, 184). He recognises that a ruling clique of hundreds

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6Indeed, there is empirical evidence showing how this sort of uneven playing field between elites and the many may well turn into a slide towards authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010).
would be subject to distinct forms of corruption and abuse. But, is there anything internal to his epistemic argument which sustains this claim: why not rule by 100 if these are the 100 most competent people? Brennan cannot easily invoke the ‘wisdom of crowds’ or other arguments for aggregation, since he rejects these arguments in his critique of democracy. Implicitly, Brennan must appeal to non-epistemic concerns about corruption and cronyism and favouritism for the very few; but these are the same considerations that call for a more robust response to oligarchic power more generally.

What might this response look like? Democratic theorists have increasingly fixated on premodern regimes like Athens, where the demos regulated socioeconomic elites through a sophisticated system of institutionally mediated practices, centred on the assembly and people’s courts. Josiah Ober argues, persuasively, that the demos did possess significant epistemic virtues. It successfully integrated technical knowledge with the social knowledge and shared values of a diverse population, such that the ‘superior returns to social cooperation resulting from useful knowledge’ exceeded the costs of participatory practices (Ober 2010, 37–38); returns which gave Athens a comparative advantage over its Greek rivals. The system relied on a sophisticated set of semiotic practices, which mediated the relationship between mass and elite so to ensure that ordinary citizens retained dignity even amid considerable material inequality (Ober 1989); norms like isonomia (equality before the law) and isegoria (equal right to address the assembly) prevailed.7

Brennan finds the democratic preoccupation with respect, dignity, and equal status to be essentially overblown; epistocracy should not be rejected simply because it has disrespectful semiotics (AD, 131). However, the Athenian example suggests that the yearning for equal status is not simply a contingent feature of modern liberal democracies, as Brennan insists. At a minimum, a book titled Against Democracy needs to grapple with the legacy of the world’s first successful democracy.

Of course, Brennan is right to disabuse contemporaries of overly romanticised and aestheticised visions of democracy; we agree that ‘democracy is not a poem or painting’ (AD, 125). Political power is indeed control over people’s bodies, as Brennan suggests, and it needs to be treated as such (AD, 127). However, Brennan’s tendency to conflate the critique of democracy with a critique of ‘politics’ as such can be confusing (AD, 231–245). The things Brennan finds distasteful about political life – organised

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7Notwithstanding the exclusion of women, slaves, and metics from full citizenship privileges.
violence, subjection, civic enmity – could also persist within an epistocratic system of coercive rule.

Political life is messy, and it does expose people to distinctive harms. But this is precisely why Brennan’s attempt to analogise politics with spheres like medicine and plumbing seems misguided (AD, 130–132). Most citizens understand that their political rights have been won through blood and tears; few would second Brennan’s claim that citizens are generally less empowered voting than in ‘finding a five dollar bill on the sidewalk’ (AD, 75). This may be because they’ve been indoctrinated into an idealised view of democracy. The more likely explanation: citizens have perfectly rational reasons for jealously clinging to their democratic privileges. Brennan concedes that ‘in general, the best places to live right now are liberal democracies’ (AD, 8). Why, then, is Brennan confident that he can improve on this state of affairs? And how exactly is epistocracy supposed to be an improvement? We turn to those questions in the next section.

This is what democracy looks like

Ultimately we aim to show that Brennan is not much of a realist when it comes to his depiction of electoral politics. But he is more of a realist than he lets on in terms of his normative proposals, since he recognises that ‘ideal epistocracy isn’t a live option’ (AD, 207). Thus, ‘given what we know about political behaviour, including what we know about rent seeking, corruption, and abuses of power’, Brennan asks, ‘which is likely to deliver better results, some form of epistocracy or some form of democracy;’ in the real world, ‘both pigs will be ugly’ (AD, 207). Regrettably, Brennan never really follows through on this real-world comparison. He flags the objection that he is comparing ideal epistocracy with non-ideal democracy, but doesn’t do much to address it beside suggesting that proponents of democracy were once in his position, making informed conjectures and proposing experiments (AD, 230). Here one could object that this comparison between real apples and ideal oranges is not inevitable. After all, plenty of real-world regimes have billed themselves as epistocracies – from the Soviet Union and other centrally-planned systems to private capital-friendly contemporary China. Indeed it is somewhat telling that the only types of epistocracy Brennan countenances are mere correctives of democracy: values-only voting, restricted suffrage, plural voting, enfranchisement lottery, universal suffrage with epistocratic veto, and his preferred one, weighted voting (or ‘government by simulated oracle’, as per Brennan’s characteristically glossy rebranding) (AD, 220 ff). If the
rule of the knowers is so appealing, why not embrace it wholeheartedly, rather than following up the anti-democratic epistemic bluster with a highly democratically diluted version of epistocracy? To be sure, Brennan sees the force of Burkean arguments for democracy (AD, 228–230), but it remains unclear exactly why his balancing act between conservative caution and radical experimentalism leads exactly to his preferred form of epistocracy, nor why more straightforwardly epistocratic forms of government are not even considered.

Still, we can set aside our worries about unfair comparisons and arbitrary conclusions, for Brennan’s approach to epistocracy as a corrective to democracy betrays a far more serious problem. The problem, as we will try to show in the remainder of this essay, is empirical: electoral democracy just isn’t a mechanism for selecting policies and institutions, and not even for selecting elites. Nor can it be – not in the real world in the foreseeable future, that is; especially under conditions where the oligarchic influence over public policy remains so pronounced. Most of the faults Brennan finds in democracy are due to his assumption that democracy functions as a choice mechanism for policy outcomes or leader selection. Likewise, his epistocratic corrective is meant to oil and improve this mechanism. But the empirical evidence tells us that this mechanism just isn’t there.

Recall how Brennan rejects democratic proceduralism in favour of instrumentalism, where democracy is just a tool. But a tool for what? For Brennan, democracy is a tool for making competent political decisions, i.e. generating relatively just outcomes: ‘the only reason to favor democracy over any other political system is that it is more effective at producing just results, according to procedure-independent standards of justice’ (AD, 11). Arguably the descriptive theory of democracy underpinning Brennan’s position is the one Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, in their recent landmark empirical study of voting behaviour, dub the ‘populist’ model of democracy as popular sovereignty; namely the view, associated with Dahl and many others, that through democracy ordinary citizens can determine the policies of their polity (Achen and Bartels 2016, 2). Whether they do so by authorising elected individuals or directly through referenda is indifferent to the basic structure of the model. The point is just that on the populist model democracy is a tool for a people to express a unified political will and see it carried out. Brennan’s argument for the right to competent government, as we have seen, depends on such an understanding of democracy – hence the talk of electorates exercising political authority over individual citizens. The problem here, however, is that no such power is exercised:
… most democratic citizens are uninterested in politics, poorly informed, and unwilling or unable to convey coherent policy preferences through ‘issue voting’… The populist ideal of electoral democracy, for all its elegance and attractiveness, is largely irrelevant in practice, leaving elected officials mostly free to pursue their own notions of the public good or to respond to party and interest group pressures. (Achen and Bartels 2016, 14)8

This description of the citizenry may seem to help Brennan’s argument, but it doesn’t. If, by voting, citizens do not select policies or leaders, then how can Brennan hold them accountable for violating anyone’s right to competent government? To be sure, citizens are partly causally responsible for the set of policies that end up being implemented. But the empirical evidence shows that they are not morally responsible, which is a problem for Brennan, since his argument about the right to competent government is a moral one. Put another way, the empirical evidence tells us that even a perfectly competent electorate wouldn’t be able to exercise power as Brennan presumes electorates do, so no electorate can be held to account for the unjust outcomes of an election.9 Ironically enough, Brennan falls victim to the unrealistic delusions of the democratic theorists he so berates for their idealism.10

It should be clear by now how that empirical issue is a problem not just for Brennan’s critique of democracy, but also for his proposed epistocratic remedy. Weighing votes on the basis of voters’ competence just isn’t going to magically give voters control over policy outcomes. Here Brennan might object that competent voting might result in more coherent ‘issue voting’, and thus keep elected officials on a shorter leash. To address that reply we need to briefly consider the evidence on how

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8 The quoted passage refers to electoral rather than direct populist democracy. But similar considerations apply to the latter as well, as referenda typically empower donors and interest groups rather than the electorate (Achen and Bartels 2016, 15 and Chapter 3). Achen and Bartels also show that leadership selection theories of democracy – a terrain where Brennan may be tempted to retreat – fare comparably badly insofar as they rely on the retrospective theory of voting, which in turn is wildly unrealistic in its attribution to voters of an ability to recognise changes in their welfare, let alone assess responsibility for such changes (Achen and Bartels 2016, 16 and Chapter 6).

9 Brennan may wish to argue that, at least in principle, one could devise a competence test that picks out and magnifies the votes of the few voters who possess relevant information and are disposed to vote on issues. But given the numbers at stake, this would take us extremely far from electoral democracy and Brennan’s millions of epistocrats, and closer to a genuine government by philosopher kings. At which point it’s not even clear why we should bother with elections in the first place, given that the vast majority of voting behaviour would have to be discarded as irrelevant.

10 Roberto Frega recently defended the populist – or classical – theory of democracy against the realist challenge (Frega forthcoming). Engaging with his argument, however, would take us too far from our present focus. At any rate the broadly Deweyan position Frega defends is hardly compatible with Brennan’s. While Frega may have a point when he says that Achen and Bartels’s critique of classical democratic theory might obscure from view some of the ways in which democracy may be improved, their results remain useful for our critique of Brennan, insofar as Brennan takes himself to be engaging with actually existing, present-day democracy.
voters – including the most informed ones – actually vote. Achen and Bartels show that ‘voters, even the most informed voters, typically make choices not on the basis of policy preferences or ideology but on the basis of who they are – their social identities’ (2016, 4). Electoral democracy, at least under present institutional conditions, is less a mechanism for selecting policies than for affirming one’s social identity: ‘voting behavior primarily reflects and reinforces voters’ social loyalties, it is a mistake to suppose that elections result in popular control of public policy’ (Achen and Bartels 2016, 4).

Note how our argument does not depend on this social loyalty-based theory of voting behaviour, but simply on the (less controversial) rejection of the populist theory. Yet, even though it is not needed to rule out Brennan’s epistocratic corrective to democracy, Achen and Bartels’ ‘group theory of democracy’ (2016, 16) enables us to close on a more positive note, at least as far as some defences of democracy go. We want to suggest that the group theory points towards an account of the symbolic value of democracy Brennan does not consider. It seems plausible to suggest that if voters perform the ostensibly irrational task of voting (as per the voter’s paradox) they probably derive from it a worthwhile affirmation of their sense of belonging in their social group – something other than mere self-expression and the other symbolic values Brennan considers (AD, 115); a point that holds even if the voters mistakenly believe the populist theory of democracy, for most people can intuit the force of the voter’s paradox, and in any case it is not clear that they would stop voting were they to become convinced of the group theory of democracy.11 This is not a line of argument we can pursue properly here. But we can at least note that, pace Brennan, it is a line of argument democratic theorists can embrace despite – indeed, partly because of – the evidence on voters’ political incompetence. Democracy may not be a poem, but it might just be a mirror that reveals to us where we belong in society. That might be less than we bargained for, but it’s not as if Brennan’s epistocratic correctives to democracy – as opposed to full epistocracy,12 for that matter – are likely to deliver anything other than a slightly foggier mirror.13

11A point borne out, for example, by the identity-driven defiant behaviour of strikers in situations in which it is clear that their policy aims are out of reach (Pizzorno 1978).
12It’s not as if we wish to defend fully-fledged epistocracy – far from it. It just seems fair to point out that our argument hasn’t tried to rule it out, as it focuses just on Brennan’s epistocratic corrective of democracy.
13Our research for this piece was supported by the Dutch National Science Organisation’s Vidi project ‘Legitimacy Beyond Consent’ (grant n. 016.164.351).
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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